

## **Sports Diplomacy in Iraq**

One year ago, ECA launched a series of sports initiatives in partnership with the International Olympic Committee (IOC) and U.S. Olympic Committee (USOC) to help Iraq reenter the international sports community. The latest exchange, June 17–July 7, brought seven Iraqi athletes and coaches to participate in the Titan Games in Atlanta, GA and train at the U.S. Olympic training center in Colorado Springs, CO to prepare for the 2004 Olympics in Athens and the 2004 Arab Games in Algeria.

The IOC suspended Iraq from Olympic competition in May 2003 because of human rights abuses by the director of Iraq's Olympic movement, Uday Hussein. After the coalition-liberated Iraq, they started from scratch and held over 500 democratic elections for sports federations and clubs. On January 29, 2004 in Suleymaniyah, Iraq a new Olympic Committee was elected. Ahmed Al Samarrai was elected President of the National Olympic Committee of Iraq. Iraq now has 41 recognized sports federations and 214 clubs.

Iraq will send 29 athletes among a 45 member delegation to the Olympics in Athens (August 13-29), ten times the size of the four-athlete team sent to the Olympics in Sydney in 2000. The athletes will compete in soccer, swimming, track and field, taekwondo, boxing and weightlifting. Iraq will also send a delegation to the Athens Paralympics, (September 17-28) to compete in fencing, weightlifting, and track and field.

The latest sports initiative brought the Iraqi delegation to the Titan Games in Atlanta (June 17-20), to compete against 200 athletes from 11 countries in boxing, wrestling, and Paralympic fencing (wheelchair). As part of their exchange experience, they watched the Olympic torch – on its global relay to Athens -- enter Centennial Park in Atlanta and light the Olympic flame. They also met Olympians Joe Frazier and Bruce Jenner. In Colorado Springs they trained with the U.S. Olympic team at the Olympic facility, toured Denver and celebrated the fourth of July with families of USOC staff and friends.

The Iraqi athletes have received widespread media coverage, including stories by Arab television network Al Hurra, which has already broadcast one of the segments in Iraq. Exchange participant, 24-year-old boxer, Najah Ali, probably Iraq's best hope for a medal, in an interview said, "I didn't judge the American people while in Iraq. I waited until I came here to judge them, and the American people have been the best people out of any I have met."

Another participant, 24-year-old wrestler Ahamad Weali tells the story of when an Iraqi wrestler defected at the 2000 Arab Games in Syria, "They called us all together after our return and told us that we would receive awards from Uday. We were taken to the prison where all of our hair was shaved off and we were beaten with ropes and chains, some got electric shocks." About his current experience Weali said, "It is totally different now. We can feel we are real athletes. The age of fear for ourselves and our families is over. We feel free."